

# Now and Zen



**Rosemary McLeod delights in the theatre of everyday life in Japan.**

I've stepped into a place where reality is layered with contradiction and paradox, alien and familiar, very old and very new.

**I'M WALKING** behind a Japanese woman who is dressed as a bat, partnered by an equally poker-faced Japanese man dressed as a Catholic priest. A housewife in an apricot kimono stands out, graceful in the dark-dressed crowd, carrying red roses home in her shopping bag.

The population of New Zealand passes through this central Tokyo subway station daily, 4.5 million people, yet there's no rubbish, no graffiti, no cigarette butts, none of the familiar polka dots of chewing gum, and no beggars. The vast space is immaculate and orderly, almost eerie.

Women may trip daintily in traditional dress beside modern office workers in drab suits, but there's uniformity when you look closer. The Japanese have always changed their dress with the seasons, and now wear accents of orange, brown, dirty pink, rusty red, dull yellow and green, shades of the prize chrysanthemums on display at temples, and of the last falling leaves. The externals may have changed in the modern world, but inwardly, it seems, nothing has changed.

I've stepped through the looking glass, like Alice, into a place where reality is layered with contradiction and paradox, alien and familiar, very old and very new. Western imagery looks Japanese here and Japanese western. The difference is in the detail, creating visual

**Top, a maiko, or apprentice geisha, in Gion, Kyoto. Above, Shinto priests in Tokyo.** Photos: Getty Images, Reuters



harmony within a state of mind profoundly and proudly different. It's a world, it seems, in which no effect is left to chance, and the artfully natural prevails: of reflection, tranquillity, tradition, respect, cohesion and order, of exquisite taste, and of commercial sentimentality so crass that it makes you laugh.

City people in crowded streets clogged with overhead wires keep carefully tended pot plants along ribbon strips of footpath, gardens where no garden is possible – and they survive, un-vandalised: the crowded living conditions breed courtesy, not chaos, and shops wrap your humble purchases as if they're Faberge eggs.

Two days in Tokyo is only time for highlights. We head for the Meiji Jingu, the busy Shinto shrine dedicated to the Meiji emperor (1852-1912) and his consort. After their deaths, the Japanese people donated 100,000 trees for their souls

to live in, creating the mature surrounding forest. Barrels of sake and French wine line the entry, gifts from businesses, and chrysanthemum societies display prized plants like regimented troops in the emperor's honour. Once inside, it would be foolish not to observe the ritual cleansings, donate coins, bow twice, clap your hands twice, and bow again in his honour, since it was the Meiji emperor who opened up Japan to the world. (His soul is here, his body in Kyoto, the old imperial capital.) It must be an auspicious day for weddings: family groups gather to take photographs, teenage girls giggling in kimonos that can cost as much as a couture dress.

Noh theatre is an acquired taste; although I prefer it to the raw fish constantly on offer in restaurants. At the Tessenkai Noh theatre in Omotesando we sit on bench seats around the stage, the only Europeans in the packed audience, and marvel. This disciplined tradition of slow sound and movement, highly nuanced, dates back hundreds of years, and is

## Fact file

### More places to visit in Tokyo:

Edo Onsen Monogatari traditional hot springs, spa and Edo village; The Marunouchi business and high-end shopping area; Omotesando Dori for shops of famous brands and European prices.

### More places to visit in Kyoto:

Kyoto International Manga Museum; The Golden Pavilion; Toei Uzumasa Movie Land to meet Japanese actors, and see how they make those martial arts movies; Raak, a fabric shop near Gion where they'll fold any of their fabric squares into an origami handbag if you ask; Honke Owariya, a fresh soda and udon noodle restaurant, trading since 1465; Nijo Castle, built in 1603 as the Kyoto residence of the first Tokugawa Shogun.

### How to get there:

- Fly Air New Zealand to Tokyo from \$1835 per person return or Osaka from \$1837 per person return. For travel April 10 to July 31. Sale ends April 30. Visit [www.airnz.co.nz](http://www.airnz.co.nz)
- Stay three nights at the Hotel Metropolitan Tokyo plus return flights on Air New Zealand from \$1699. Sales end April 15 for travel from April 9 to 30. For full terms and conditions see [www.airnz.co.nz](http://www.airnz.co.nz)



passed down within families. Avoid it if you like action or expect a complex storyline. I love it. It throws the local Harajuku subculture of bizarrely dressed kids into perspective as a form of contemporary street theatre, performing their own ritualised, narcissistic dramas.

We leave town for lunch at Ukai Toriyama, a two-Michelin-star restaurant that lies a train ride then a bus ride away, west of Tokyo. If you were to eat only one Japanese meal in your life, this would be the place to go, not only for the food but for its fairy-tale setting, a village of traditional buildings with thatched, mossy roofs and exquisite gardens.

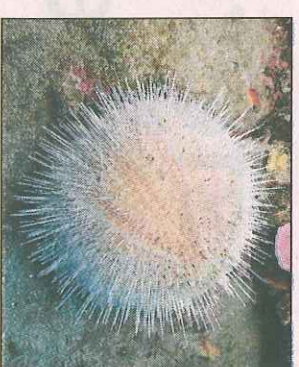
In seating pits at a low table, waited on by a young woman in a kimono with a rainbow of hairclips, this late lunch is eight courses of consummate simplicity and pleasure. Set aside your qualms about top-quality marbled Japanese steak and enjoy the miraculous taste straight from the barbecue set onto your table, with a pile of feathery raw onion, somehow stripped of its nastiness, alongside.



## [escape]

Muted hues at the Tenryū-ji Zen Buddhist temple in Sagano, Kyoto.

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### Lost in translation ...

#### Scariest Japanese food:

- Sea urchin, above, and cream cheese on crackers.
- Raw chicken.

#### Great Japanese drink:

- Chuhai – shochu (a bit like vodka) and fruit juice.

#### Watch out for:

- Holes in your socks – you have to take your shoes off at restaurants and temples.
- Tattoos: you are not welcome anywhere with visible tattoos, and body tattoos will get you ejected from swimming pools and spas. They are inflexibly linked to yakuza, Japanese criminals.
- The currency. Take a calculator.

#### Enjoy:

- The Japanese toilet experience, warm seats and bidet sprays of warm water at the touch of a button.

#### Menu English (not fair, but still – my favourites):

- "I sprinkled the soup which a crab was in to an omelet."
- "A beefsteak. I wore roasted meat sauce."

bark, elaborately bandaged wounded samurai, to see the coming winter through.

A final trip to Gion, with its geisha houses and quaint old buildings, and wish I could walk through its deep red curtain to the most celebrated geisha house in the city. Still, I know better than to think these highly trained human art works would be glad to see me, or that mystery can be revealed by the mere twitching of a cloth.

Better to leave the mystery intact, with a gentle breeze ruffling the curtains. Sadly, it's time to go.

■ Rosemary McLeod travelled to Japan courtesy of Air New Zealand.

made in the 12th century when the temple was founded, and the rest a century later. The hall also holds statues of the Thunder God, Wind God, and other deities, but the 1001 steal the show, a ghostly army of elegant virtue, glowing in soft natural light.

It's also worth visiting the Toji temple, with the tallest pagoda in Japan, and another treasure trove of Buddhas. Like so many historic Japanese buildings it has been destroyed many times, but rebuilt exactly as it was: the present temple was first built in 826.

It's helpful having a Buddhist guide to explain what you're seeing, because there are surprises in the theology. At the Kiyomizu Temple we learn that it's a sin to die as a baby because of the grief you cause your parents, and that Japanese women who've aborted babies – which you can do here solely on economic grounds – come to a shrine here to pray for their unborn children to be happy in the afterlife.

In spring the grounds of this temple will be awash in pale pink cherry blossom: there are viewing platforms for admiring the trees through the seasons, and it's the gardens that prove to be my personal stars of Kyoto, starting with the Sagano giant bamboo forest.

Walking through these 30m-high towers of bamboo, each as thick as an adult's thigh, is a cool and almost mystical experience; the air seems somehow cleaner, and the world quieter – until a train rushes through a tunnel underneath.

Outside we buy small roasted chestnuts straight from the brazier, tasting of sweet potato and mellow pumpkin.

Among the many world heritage sites in Kyoto, Ryōanji Temple is a must, with its Zen garden of 15 rocks in a sea of white, raked pebbles, an acknowledged masterpiece of Japanese culture. The shadows of nearby trees falling on the pristine gravel echo the

artfully arranged reflections in water of other famous gardens around the city, and make of this a constantly changing work of art.

The garden at Tenryū Temple, also designed for contemplation, combines rocks, trees and water to create its visual paradise, as do the gardens at the Heian Jingu Shrine, seemingly exploring the point at which reality begins and illusion ends – or the other way round.

In a country steeped inseparably in religion and tradition, it's inevitable that gardening will be an exercise in reflection and shadows, philosophy in the dirt. Small stone-edged plant plots, looking like a row of pets' graves, have headstones painted with poems about the plants lying dormant beneath, awaiting spring.

I will remember a gardener high up a ladder in a pine tree, sifting surplus leaves to the ground, turning like hundreds of false eyelashes, and ancient cherry trees wrapped up snugly in other tree's

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